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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 001532

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/04/2018  
TAGS: MARR PREL PGOV KS KN  
SUBJECT: ALLIANCE SCHOLARS CAUTION AGAINST MAINTAINING THE STATUS QUO

Classified By: A/DCM Joseph Y. Yun, Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

**¶1. (C) SUMMARY.** In a series of recent discussions with top Korean experts, including former ministers and ambassadors, a common theme emerged: although the U.S.-ROK Alliance has brought Korea peace, stability, and prosperity for the last half-century, North Korea no longer poses the military threat it once did. As a result, to remain relevant, the U.S. must recognize this reality and transform the Alliance accordingly, they argued. While acknowledging the importance of Alliance transformation issues, such as USFK realignment and transition of wartime operational control (OPCON), the experts cautioned U.S. "patience," taking appropriate measure and consideration of the Korean government's political fragility. END SUMMARY.

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SHIFTING PERCEPTIONS AND REALITY  
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**¶2. (SBU)** Chief among the opinions presented by top Korean security and alliance experts in a series of recent roundtable discussions of the future of the U.S.-ROK Alliance was that the alliance does not exist in a vacuum. There was little argument that the Alliance succeeded in its original mission of deterring a North Korean military threat. But there no disagreement that to succeed in the 21st century, the Alliance must evolve into a partnership that reflects today's circumstances and significant shifts in the average Korean citizen's perceptions of what the Alliance's form and function are and should be in the future.

**¶3. (SBU)** The single most significant shift in perception noted by the roundtable experts was that most South Koreans no longer see North Korea as the South's primary security threat. As such, many scholars argued that the North Korean threat was fading as a valid justification for the U.S.-ROK Alliance's existence. Rather, South Korea now views regional threats ( specifically from Japan and China with whom they share a long and at times, dark history ) pose the greater risk to South Korea's future stability. For this reason, most scholars acknowledged that Koreans still see U.S. presence on Peninsula as important for regional stability. According to a June 2006 World Gallop Poll, although less than half (43%) of Koreans feel seriously threatened by North Korean nuclear weapons, two-thirds (66%) of Koreans believe a U.S. withdrawal from their country would greatly impact the stability of Northeast Asia. Rather, the Alliance should enable continued regional security, including efforts to

denuclearize North Korea, as well as facilitate the eventual peaceful reunification of the Korean Peninsula.

¶14. (SBU) A second important consideration, scholars emphasized, was that the core component of Alliance transformation should be on issues affecting the core of the Alliance, specifically the on-Peninsula efforts to transfer wartime OPCON to the ROK military and the realignment of U.S. forces on the peninsula. Many acknowledged that these two issues faced some opposition within Korea, particularly among certain conservative Grand National Party members and Lee Myung-bak's administration. But the majority of experts came to the conclusion that maintaining the status quo on the Peninsula would be a fatal mistake.<sup>8</sup> In general, there was support among Koreans for Koreans assuming greater control and responsibility for their own security.

¶15. (SBU) An increased Korean role and responsibility in the international community was a common theme in the roundtable discussions as well. At a June 24 seminar on "The ROK-U.S. Strategic Alliance," Korea University's Kim Sung-han called for a broader U.S.-ROK Alliance that encompasses a range of non-military cooperation, particularly humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts. The ROKG has made a number of such contributions, including sending peacekeepers to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon. However, scholars made a point to emphasize that the ROKG's primary motivation in contributing on the global stage is to placate the U.S. government, not necessarily due to a belief that it is the right thing to do.

For the Korean public, on the other hand, scholars agree that they generally support the idea of increased global participation, but believe (perhaps unjustifiably) that Korea already contributes significantly and deserves more international recognition and respect for its participation. Regardless of the level of contribution, scholars and the public agreed that future ROKG endeavors should better reflect Korea's still undefined interests rather than merely what the United States' wants other countries to contribute. The experts stressed that the United States needs to understand this reality, and thus not expect or demand too much in return from ROK on the global stage, letting Korea define its own international role.

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